DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 391 163 CS 215 167

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TITLE To Logology and Back--The Late Essays of Kenneth Burke.
PUB DATE Jul 95
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition (14th, University Park, PA, July 12-15, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Critical Theory; *Essays; Higher Education; *Language Role; Linguistics; *Literary Criticism; *Rhetoric; *Rhetorical Theory
IDENTIFIERS *Burke (Kenneth); Logology

ABSTRACT

As a writer and critic, Kenneth Burke defies convenient pigeonholing. Even if just one segment of Burke's public writings is considered, the 40-plus critical essays of the post-Libbie (his Muse and secretary), post-LSA ("Language as Symbolic Action") era, the difficulty of categorizing him remains. The earlier periods of his life are more or less defined by decade, which presents a rather hollow version of Burke. The search for an understanding of this post-Libbie period must strive for a suitable strategy for appreciating the full complexity of Burke's work. Burke said language not only enables but requires situations to be approached strategically. So as a means of reviewing the works of this period, a list of strategies for classifying them is helpful. First, the scholar might take the lead of other Burkean commentators and identify the distinctive nature of the late essays. James Chesebro (1993), for instance, identifies 1968 as the year that Burke finally gave up the "comedic posture" and got into the serious business of ontological inquiry. Second, the scholar could treat the final essays as Burke's attempt to finalize his system. Third, the scholar might list and characterize Burke's co-hagglers of the period, from Wellek, Jameson, and Howell to Vitanza, and Lentricchia and Booth. Fourth, the scholar might compare the situatedness of these essays with the situatedness of earlier works. Fifth, the scholar might account for the temporal progression among the essays or a sub-group within the essays. (Contains 26 references.) (TB)

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To Logology and Back--The Late Essays of Kenneth Burke

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(Delivered at the Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, July 1995)

Twenty years ago, in the summer of 1975, Burke confided to Cowley,

> The thing is, Malcolm, since Libbie cleared out, I have quit putting out my books. For two reasons: the second is that she helped so much by having been a secretary; the first is that she helped so much by my being so crazy about her, I was driven to prove, prove, prove, only roundabout to the shitten world, because so directly every day and night to her I was appealing. (6/9/75)

In this praise of Libbie as Muse and secretary, we see Burke's typical "both-and" dialectic: the consummation of Idea and Matter, or Purpose and Agency, or action and motion, transcendence and immanence, Libbie as Soul-mate, Libbie as Body-mate. The decline and death of Libbie roughly coincide with the publication of Burke's last book, Language as Symbolic Action, so one is tempted to take Burke's elegant praise as an accurate statement of his publishing motives.[1] The trouble is Burke did continue to publish, and rather voluminously, (however volume-lessly, in terms of a single book). In all, Burke wrote reviews, essays, poems,

[1] Dramatism and Development, published in 1972, is more a pamphlet or a pair of essays (two Clark University lectures), than a book by the standard of Burke's other books.

postscripts, replies, and countless letters; he dabbled in music composition, delivered talks, granted interviews--in a word, he verbalized--and with the kind of scope and energy typical of any other period in his life.

How might we best characterize this last and very productive stage of Burke's verbalizing? Limiting the task, as I intend, to just one segment of Burke's public writings, the forty-plus critical essays of the post-Libbie, post-LSA era, will probably ease the difficulty but slightly. Regardless of how one chooses to discuss or narrow him, Burke defies convenient pigeonholing, and this elusiveness of his has gone far towards enhancing his celebrity status among postmodern critics. On the other hand, Burke himself never tired of pointing out that the language using animal is a classifying animal, so it seems only natural for us to come to terms--to find the right name for this Last Phase of Burke's career.

The earlier periods of his life are more or less loosely defined by decade: the teens present Burke the Flaubert, the literary aesthete in New York City; the twenties gave us the literary critic, music reviewer, short story writer and novelist; the thirties added a literary theorist beneath the critic, and threw in a post-depression, quasi-socialist social theorist; the forties give rise to a language philosopher; the fifties a rhetorician; the sixties a logologer.

Such a list, while it suggests the scope of Burke's speculations and their development from literature through human rela-

tions to language theory, presents a rather hollow version of Burke. It leaves us with mere titles, which, as Burke himself might remind us, are always inadequate when left to stand in their naked, oversimplified generality. Our search here must not merely be for a name for the period, but for a suitable strategy for appreciating the full complexity of all that is subsumed in that name. Burke said language not only enables but requires us to approach situations strategically. So as I re-read the essays of this period, I kept a running tab of possible strategies by which to encompass this most discursive of situations. What I wish to share with you today is a log of those strategies in a presentation that is perhaps more pastiche than panorama, but one that is nonetheless offered as a heuristic for investigating just what to do with these provocative and varied pieces of Burke.

First, I thought I might take the lead of other Burkéan commentators and identify the distinctive nature of the late essays. James Chesebro, for instance, identifies 1968 as the year that Burke finally gave up his "comedic posture" and got into the serious business of ontological inquiry (141). Cary Nelson, on the other hand, uses Burke's late work as the basis for formulating his deconstructionist counter-Burke to the humanist Burke of earlier criticism.

Or in a more humanistic vein, I could turn to Bill Rueckert who identifies "the Burke who took to the road in the late sixties and has stayed on the road ever since, lecturing, talking, reading, thinking on his feet--the critic at large in the most literal and

Emersonian sense of this phrase, which is: the thinker let loose in our midst" ("Rereading" 254). On the road with Kenneth Burke--some very inviting possibilities there--a strategy, might I punningly suggest, destined to discover just what was driving Burke those many days and words.

Moving along, Strategy 2: Treat the final essays as Burke's attempt to finalize his system. On July 19, 1972, Burke wrote to Cowley "Give me but two more years, and I'll prove my point"--though I should point out, as Burke does, that he was drunk when he wrote that.

Strategy 3: List and characterize Burke's co-hagglers of the period, from Wellek, Jameson, and Howell to Vitanza, Lentricchia, Booth, and McKeon, and everyone in between.

Strategy 4: Compare the situatedness of these essay with the situatedness of the earlier works. What would Burke the dialectician have been against if he didn't have technology--the perfect scapegoat, since it is so perfectly the caricature, as he says, of human rationality?

Strategy 5: Account for the temporal progression among the essays or a sub-group within the essays, like, for instance, the Helhaven satires.

Strategy 6: Organize by genre.

Strategy 7: Construct a concordance of the major recurrent themes, which are as follows: analogical extension; catharsis and transcendence; ecology; the victimization of nature; or, the infanticidal motive of "Ever Onward" ("Creativity" 74); or

"technologism," the belief that the solution to the problems of technology is more technology ("Communication" 148); or, "hypertechnologism"; or, "technological psychosis"; or, the irrationality of the excess of rationality; or, the "pandemoniac multiplicity" of technology ("Towards Looking Back" 189); dramatism as ontology/logology as epistemology; the trinitarian addition of consummation to Burke's earlier theories of expression and communication; entelechy; archetype; consummation as "a kind of creative yielding to potentialities which are seen by the given seer to be implicit in the given set of terms" ("Poetics" 403); the autosuggestiveness of creativity ("Creativity" 77); the compulsiveness of creativity; the rounding out of a material operation by a corresponding act of symbolism ("Doing and Saying"); substitution and duplication; symbolic duplication as cathartic release or entelechial compulsion ("(Psychological) Fable"); the attitude of apprehensiveness; psychic immobilization ("Eye-Poem"); transcendence.

Strategy: 8 How about cataloguing new moments in Burke lore, as for instance those rare glimpses of Burke responding to much more recent cultural and scenic phenomena than those commented on in his more established works? A favorite of mine is his appreciative but cautionary response to J. Hillis Miller in particular and postmodern criticism in general. After discussing Miller's analysis of Hopkins, Burke writes, "This brings out the whole issue in which a lot of my colleagues are now interested--that of the marvels of verbal structure. But I have to push back now;

they've brought that out too much. People have accused me of just reducing things to words; the whole system is absolutely the opposite of that. That is, I make a fundamental distinction" ("On Literary Form" 85)--and on he goes into his action/motion dualism. Most certainly, Burke does not reduce things to just words. His environmentalism--or anyone's for that matter--is only logical if we grant that there is indeed something outside the text.

Certainly the most songful of strategies would be to cull aphorisms from the readings. Burke credited Libbie as the inventor of the Flowerish, and when she passed, so too did the art form for Burke. But, glancing through the readings, one can readily spot traces of the erstwhile flourish. For example: "no construction without destruction" ("Communication" 137); "the driver drives the car, but the traffic drives the driver" ("Why Satire 311); "Organisms live by killing ("Communication" 136); "We are happiest when we can plunge on and on" ("Towards Helhaven 19); "Spontaneously, what men hope for is <u>more</u>" ("Why Satire" 320); "Congregation by segregation" ("Rhetorical Situation" 268); "Life is a Pilgrimage. Life is a first draft, with constant revisions that are themselves first drafts. . . . Life is a series of prerequisite courses, in which we are all drop-outs" ("Rhetoric" 33); . . . [I]n a cult of tragedy, one is asking for it" ("Dancing" 27); "Language is one vast menagerie of implications" ("Theology" 153); Logology's wan analogue of hope is "the futuristically slanted and methodological engrossment in the tracking down of implications, which may amount to translating the grand oracu-

lar utterance, "Know thyself" into "Spy on thyself" ("Variations" 165); and finally, my favorite: "Though language does talk a lot, the very essence of its genius is in its nature as abbreviation" ("(Nonsymbolic) Motion" 823).

A few strategies are implied in my title, "To Logology and Back." For instance, we might ask just where is Burke going in his development of logology? Accordingly, I could clarify "logology," or words about words, by listing several of its key components, many of which are "borrowed back" from theology. From St. Thomas we get the principle of individuation, which for Burke is the body; from God we get godterms; from the Scholastics we get the slogan, "Crede ut intellegas": Believe that you may understand; from St. Paul we get the principle that faith comes from hearing--i.e., from doctrine; from the Trinity we get the formal pattern of naming. "Logology is vigilant with admonitions" ("Variations" 171). all of which circulate about its central question, "What is it to be the typically symbol-using animal?" ("Variations" 169).

By my title I would also suggest, though very indirectly, the possibility that Burke's development of logology is merely one of his last and most thorough defenses against his lifelong fear of death. In the interview by Harry Chapin in the early seventies Burke mentions his profound fear of death (much stronger when he was younger than at that time when he was in his mid-seventies). In his essay "The Party Line" he announces an addendum to his "Definition of Man," "acquiring foreknowledge of death" (65). But

it was a letter to Cowley, not the essays or the Chapin film, that first gave me this notion of logology as a psychic cure for the fear of death.

From early on Cowley and Burke defined how each one's project was motivated. On November 26, 1974, Burke distinguishes his project from Cowley's thus: "Basically, I think it would all berl [sic, of course] down to a distinction between what you mean by 'literary situation' as background, and what I would sloganize as 'logological' context of our poetizings." While Cowley undertook the portraiture of a particular generation, Burke would but dabble with the particular--a dazzling few pages, for instance, on the formal qualities of the ghost's entrance in Hamlet--as a way to get to general formal principles. Cowley's work would be needed for an informed view of, say, Ernest Hemingway or William Faulkner, but Burke's is required for a fuller understanding of any symbolic action, from the most mindless yeasaying a demagogue to the full reflexive action of a Shakespearean drama.

Burke would often sloganize his project as "Literature in particular, language in general," but--especially in the later years--the proportion shifts decidedly to language in general. "Language in general," or the "'logological' context of our poetizings"--what are these but the deathless realm of timeless logic, knowledge, and principles? To the extent that Burke has formulated a "logology," an epistemology, a "science," or philosophy rather of the general functions of language that apply to any particular idiom, has he not indeed transcended death? Burke's

imperviousness to critical fads is a sign of partial success on this score. Is the study of logology,motivated by an attempt to rise above the deathy realm of particulars into a veritable eternity of logical order? Can Burke's ascent to logology be Burke's way to heaven, without the baggage of religion?

Getting back to my title, what about the "and back" part of it? By this I want to suggest the age-old critical question of whether Burke develops at all in his adoption of different terminologies or whether he is engaged in writing the same book over and over again.

Many of my strategies come to a head in Burke's statement: "No one could go on making his words mean the same, even if he expended his best efforts to make them stay put" ("Theology" 185). Does one detect, lurking in this statement, a nostalgic desire to keep meaning settled once and for all? Perhaps, but it is instructive to juxtapose another provocative comment in which he defines the "minimum condition" for symbolic action as "the inability of words to 'stay put,' as when even a proper name like 'Caesar,' referring to one particular person in history, gives birth to such words as 'Kaiser' and 'Czar'" ("(Nonsymbolic) Motion" 813).

This matter of "staying put" addresses a host of issues, foremost among them being the question of whether Burke is a system-builder, and whether or not he viewed the eternal flux of language as a benefit or liability. The ambiguities of Burke's attitude are most suggestively intermingled in his "Theory of Terminology," an essay which outlines five categories of meaning, Burke's famous

five dogs. The dogs cover the important Burkean principles of verbal entelechy, tautological cycles of terms, the synecdochic, Freudian, metaphoric, and musical qualities of words--in a word all types of verbal transformations that will infuse a term with new, opposite, and apposite meanings. At first, Burke's attitude toward the sophistic realities of language seem quite clear:

> I should feel uneasy if I had to keep these various kinds of terministic cycles trimly related to one another, so that I might make a composite photograph of the lot. Rather, I would turn that whole subject around, and call attention to the fact that much of the freedom in man's capacity for symbolic action resides precisely in the range of improvising here open to him, collectively shared by all the members of his tribe. (90)

But then to illustrate this freedom, Burke offers a curious figure:

> A cycle of terms is like a cluster of stars. The sky, as viewed from any one of such positions, will show a corresponding difference in the distribution of the other positions, though they all ultimately form but one single set of interrelationships. And it is in this way that a man defies total prediction until he is finished. Indeed, prediction is in effect the application to living man of parameters derived from the realm of death; that is, the possibilities of the future reduced to terms derived from the past. (90)

Typically here, Burke confounds his fluidities with some fixities, his freedoms with some parameters, his positionality with an Ultimate Position, a single, all-encompassing set of interrelationships.

Aswirl in strategies, I began to feel the onset of the old logologer's ailment, counter-gridlock, just as I was to begin wrapping up. As matters stand, the only way to conclude a paper like this is with yet another question, or, taking another route, with a simplifying anecdote to answer all questions. Burke supplies an irresistible anecdote in his "Creativity" essay. He writes:

> I have asked students to write me three pieces, one praising something, one inveighing against something, and one lamenting. The students were to choose whatever subjects they preferred, for each such exercise. One student, choosing but one subject, praised, inveighed, and lamented within the range of that one theme alone. . . . [W]hat of that student who subjected the same topic to three totally different attitudes? (78).

So, Burke gives me a concluding anecdote that ends in a question. But: Did not that student pay Burke the most reverent homage imaginable by enacting the very attitude towards language implicit in and unifying, though discursively, all of Burke's writings? Has not the mischievous student of a more mischievous teacher come to see, if only inchoately, that language requires such liquidity if one would strive for "maximum consciousness"

(ATH 171)? Is not such a student on his way to seeing, as Burke clearly did, that language is forever doubling reality, forever entitling it; forever changing, forever remaining just as it is, forever defining, forever substituting its definitions? And finally, is not the good student learning that if language it has the power to transport us into the "heaven" of the subtlest theology, and uplift us with the pious and beautiful songs of thanksgiving that theology inspires, it also has equal power to transcend downwards, as it gives "rise" to pollution, bombs, and demagoguery?

Might I then conclude, tentatively, or with some measure of intelligent inconclusiveness as homage to Burke's attitude, that the same liquidity Burke asks for in our attitudes toward life characterize our attitude towards Burke himself? Burke now is finished. His works just are, and, as he might say, if all his words were obliterated tomorrow, they will go on forever having been uttered. They have formed a completed total set of relationships, like the stars in the universe. Even if we could encompass the totality rather than take partial perspectives on it, the fact remains that for us, still in time, his meanings will not stay put. That's the only fitting last word on Burke--a roundabout invitation to more words.

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